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The Half Halt

SIX-TIME OLYMPIAN ROBERT DOVER once told a group of young dressage riders that he had two words of advice for every rider: half halt — golden words not just for the young dressage rider, but for every person settling themselves into a saddle.

Half halt is probably the most common command used by instructors in all corners of the world. You might also hear “adjustment” or “rebalance,” but whatever the term used, this supremely important riding technique is often misunderstood. Of all the topics tackled in this book, the half halt offers, by far, the

biggest challenge for the rider, in large part because it is so effective when used properly.

What Is It?

When I’m asked to define this term, I try to answer briefly and accurately so as not to totally mystify my student (enough of that will come later anyway). My description is that “a half halt is a little *whoa* (to your horse), followed by a little *go*, and finished with a little release.” Easy enough? If only.

The FEI offers this on the subject: “Every movement or transition should be invisibly

prepared by barely perceptible half halts. The half halt is an almost simultaneous, coordinated action of the seat, the legs, and the hands . . . with the object of increasing the attention and balance of the horse before the execution of the movements or transitions to lower and higher paces.

“By shifting slightly more weight onto the horse’s hindquarters, the engagement of the hind legs and the balance on the haunches are improved for the benefit of the lightness of the forehand and the horse’s balance as a whole.”



▲ FORWARD TROT



▲ MOMENT OF WHOA

An analogy that many students are able to understand is that a half halt is somewhat like a clutch on a car or truck. (With fewer and fewer people driving stick shifts, this analogy is becoming less meaningful, but I offer it anyway.) When you engage the clutch, you are telling the engine that you're either going to shift up a gear, down a gear, or maybe just stay in the same gear. The engine pauses when the clutch is engaged and waits for the driver to make a decision. This is the *whoa* portion of the half halt.

To further the analogy, the driver revs the engine when the clutch is engaged so that the car's energy is being prepped even before the next shift. This is the *go* part of the half halt. Then, when you shift the car back into a gear, the car continues. This is comparable to the release of the half halt.

Why Is It Important?

A half halt is such a make-or-break proposition that once you develop the skill and timing to use it well, you find you absolutely can't ride without it. The main purpose of the half halt is to control and direct the ever changing flow of energy between horse and rider. In directing and controlling the flow of energy, you can find a thousand and one reasons to use the half halt, and the more you use it, the better your ride will be.

When you use a half halt, you tell your horse that something might change. You may be asking him to go from one gait to another or to change tempo within a gait. You may want him to stay in the trot but be prepared to stay balanced through the upcoming corner. A half halt tells your horse to be ready for something new.

Here is a by no means complete list of the times within a ride that you could or should use a half halt:

- ▶ Transitions from one gait to another
- ▶ Shortening or adjusting strides within a gait
- ▶ Alerting the horse that a new exercise or movement is coming
- ▶ Improving or maintaining the horse's collection and self-carriage

The questions of frequency, intensity, and intention are associated with every half halt. The rider's use of it depends on the situation. Think of the half halt as having a volume control: some signals are loud and quite obvious, others are soft and barely audible, and many are somewhere in between. Although Grand Prix riders in competition use beautiful, absolutely imperceptible half



▲ GO AND RELEASE

halts, during training there are plenty of times when a “loud” half halt is just what the doctor ordered.

What Happens in a Half Halt?

If a horse is moving along with a good forward energy in a trot or canter (walk is not necessarily the most productive place to half halt because there’s minimum forward energy) and the rider asks the horse to slow down while at the same time asking for more energy and engagement, the horse should make several noticeable changes. He should:

- ▶ Feel lighter in the hands
- ▶ Show an increased desire to move forward
- ▶ Move more positively toward the bit
- ▶ Feel more longitudinally balanced

Aids for the Half Halt

Now for a look at appropriate aids. The process can be divided into three basic steps, but timing is *everything*.

THINK FORWARD. Start with the idea that your horse must be pushed forward. This action is done with a bit of seat and leg.

SLOW DOWN. At the same time, you want to send the message to briefly slow down. It’s important that the hands not take over. Too much rein will block forward movement, and the horse will

stop moving the back legs (just the opposite of what you really want). You want to “enclose” your horse between your weight, leg, and rein aids to hold the horse for a brief moment.

SOFTEN UP. After your horse responds to your message of *wait*, the third and most important step is to soften your aids so that your horse is released from the hold and moves forward again.

Let me reiterate the words “frequency,” “intensity,” and “intention.” The above description of the broad aids and their sequence opens the question of how often, how strong, how soft, and for what purpose?

A good suggestion when working on developing useful, correct

half halts with your horse is to play with the aids and their intensity. Find out what is effective and what isn’t on *your* horse.

Every horse will respond differently to a combination of the weight, leg, and hand aids. The question is what combination you need for your horse.

Fixing Mistakes in the Half Halt

The biggest mistake seems to involve the hand. When a rider uses too much rein, the horse resists and either tosses his head or simply slows down. If a rider uses too much leg, the horse could speed up and the result would be to run onto his forehead.

A HALF-HALT EXERCISE

If you’ve not ridden half halts before or just need to tune your horse in to your aids, here is a great exercise that simplifies and clarifies.

Start your horse with a trot. Now, ask for a walk transition with the idea that your horse is listening to your seat and enclosing leg, and then the application of the hand aids. After just a stride or two of walk, ask for a trot again. Next, repeat the sequence a few times.

You’ll quickly find that your horse starts to tune you in and is waiting for your next request. Next, ask for the walk, but at the *moment* your horse is going to walk, offer the release and some leg as if to say, “Oh, never mind about that walk. Let’s just stay in trot.” *That* moment is an example of a very loud half halt.

You can now try to become lighter and quieter with your aids to make the half halt less perceptible. You can also mix it up and add in a few full transitions to walk.